

*Dartmouth College, Hanover, N.H.*

The spirit of the gospel essential to a happy result  
of our religious inquiries.

AN

**ADDRESS**

TO THE

**SOCIETY FOR RELIGIOUS INQUIRY**

IN THE

**UNIVERSITY OF VERMONT.**

BURLINGTON, AUGUST 7, 1827.

**BY A. CHANDLER,**

MINISTER IN WAITSFIELD.—ALUMNUS OF THE INSTITUTION.

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*Burlington, August 8th, 1827.*

The Rev. AMARIAH CHANDLER,

Sir : The Society for Religious Inquiry of the University of Vermont tender you their hearty thanks for your address delivered last evening and, believing its important truths should be more extensively diffused, request a copy for publication.

S. L. ALLEN,  
D. WILD,  
ASA O. ALDIS, } Committee.

## ADDRESS.

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ONE of the most appalling difficulties, which appears to the young religious student, and one which presents itself at the very threshold of his inquiries, is the vast difference of opinion existing on the subject of religion. He sees men first in talents and foremost in erudition, carrying the lamp of heaven, the Bible, in their hands, acknowledging it as a common standard of appeal, and agreeing in scarcely any thing else. Astonished at the fact, conscious that all cannot be in the right, and sensible of the difficulty of deciding when "doctors disagree," he instinctively and anxiously inquires how shall I pass this gloomy forest, by what means shall I thread the labyrinth and find my way to the fair regions of celestial truth?

Such a state of things would be disheartening in the extreme, but that the Bible informs him that it is not the necessary result of the obscurity of truth, nor of any defect in the revelation, which God has given, but that it originates in the imbecility of human character and the perverseness of the human heart. This tells him that "light has come into the world, but men have loved darkness rather than light;" that pride and passion have great influence in determining the minds of some men to a particular theory, and then, by the operation of mind on mind, the theory is perpetuated through successive generations. It informs him, that with a proper spirit, and the proper and faithful use of his rational faculties, the attainment of truth is far from impossible, and that though his progress may be slow, success is sure.

The spirit, in which our religious inquiries ought to be conducted, is so very clearly pointed out in the gospel, and forms so prominent a part of its instructions, that it may be appropriately called the spirit of the gospel. The interesting society, by whose request I am here, will allow me to make this the leading thought on the present occasion, and to recommend **THE SPIRIT OF THE GOSPEL AS ESSENTIAL TO A SUCCESSFUL AND HAPPY RESULT OF THEIR INQUIRIES.**

This spirit consists in a sincere desire to be taught of God ; an ardent love of truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. A man with this spirit will cry after knowledge and lift up his voice for understanding, “ will seek her as silver and search for her as for hid treasures.” That holy word, which is the medium of truth to his mind, he will esteem “ better than thousands of gold and silver.” Nothing short of that glory, which is the result of a proper application of truth, will he esteem worthy to be compared with it. With the spirit of the gospel, a person desires truth from the purest and noblest motives. Not for the purpose of curious speculation, not that he may shine at an exhibition, triumph in debate, or be dreaded as a champion in controversy, but for the practical use of every day. Truth is the food, which nourishes, the cordial, which cheers him, and the light that directs his way. He will desire truth to guide the devotions of his closet, direct his labors in his study, in his field, or his workshop, and regulate the *minutiæ* of his intercourse both with God and man. By the precepts of truth he would build his fence, lay the furrows of his field, and the swaths of his meadow, and put the sickle into his harvest.

Such, young gentlemen, in few words, is the spirit, which the gospel requires. And you will readily perceive that with such a spirit, however ignorant for the present, or however involved in error and bound by predilection, a man possesses unspeakable advantages for prosecuting his inquiries. I might here enlarge upon the promises of God, which to one of this character are full, explicit and abounding, and ought to be sought out and

gathered up by you, and regarded as jewels beyond all price. But my business at present is with those advantages, which flow spontaneously from the spirit itself.

With the spirit of the gospel, then, you will possess all the advantages resulting from earnestness in your work, diligence, application, patience, circumspection, watchfulness for favorable opportunities and occurrences, promptitude to seize them, united with unyielding perseverance. There is a mental indolence, arising from a slight impression of the value of the object, which shrinks from the labor of research and rests satisfied with a few plain propositions, or common-place maxims, received perhaps from tradition, or carelessly adopted, and which after years of experience, makes but little progress, little improvement. But with the spirit of the gospel, your attention is bound and your mind led captive by that strong attraction, which annihilates listlessness and renders you insensible to the fatigue of study. Like the miser you *instinctively* watch, like the miser you keenly *discern*, and like the miser, but with a more rational avarice, you *seize* on every thing favorable to the advancement of your pursuit. With such a spirit how great is the advantage, and how favorable the prospect of success.

With the spirit of the gospel you will bring to your work an open and candid mind. Truth being your sole object, and having satisfied yourselves that all scripture is given by inspiration of the God of truth, instead of bringing the Bible like a prisoner to the bar, to be tried and judged by your preconceived notions and theories, formed perhaps in all the darkness and prejudice of spiritual death, you will bring all your former opinions and principles to be tried and tested by that most holy book. Truths which are plain, and, happily for us the most important, are made the most plain, you will cordially receive and use as first principles in the investigation of such as are more remote or obscure. True you may speedily find your former notions rejected, your favorite theories overturned, the strong foundation of your hope torn up and scattered as chaff in the whirlwind, and



your heart and life assailed as with the sword of Omnipotence. But what of that? What can he, who values only the pure gold, lose by the destruction of the dross? What is his object? What does he desire, who values the Bible as containing the word of life, but to have his whole heart and soul searched and penetrated and purified and refined by the influence of gospel truth, that he may become in all respects that "new creature" of whom it is said "old things are passed away, behold all things are become new."

With this spirit, you escape the paralyzing influence of certain maxims, which are found on the lips of many, and which appear with a practical effect on the lives of many more. One is, "no matter what a man believes, provided he really or sincerely believe it." This may be true, or at least innoxious, applied to the mere drapery and not the great principles of religion. As he, who has secured a birth in a safe ship may reach the desired port, and it matters little whether his bark be impelled by wind or steam. But where the chance for him who commits his all to a rotten hulk and trusts it on the "mountain wave," without sail or compass, chart or pilot? The other is,

"For points of faith let furious zealots fight,  
His can't be wrong, whose life is in the right."

Sweetly as this may sound in the flowing numbers of the sweetest of poets, and much of truth as it may contain when applied to many subjects of controversy, it contains when applied, as it often is to the distinguishing doctrines of revelation, an assumption equally false, insidious and pernicious. It assumes that a person's faith has, or may have no necessary effect upon his life: of course that a man's life may be right and he at the same time consistent with himself, when his belief is essentially wrong. Grant to every man, what if you refuse to grant, almost every man will feel himself injured if not insulted, grant the credit of self-consistency—take a fair position, and expose at once the weakness and folly of the conceit. Suppose that after all that has been said respecting the divine nature of the Lord Jesus

Christ, he be found at last a man, a mere man like ourselves, can his life be in the right, who has bowed to him the knee in adoration and laid the sacrifice of prayer and praise upon his altar? Suppose the contrary; can his life be in the right, who has withdrawn from him the honor due to God, however he may have honored and applauded him as man? Suppose what are sometimes called the evangelical doctrines, sometimes the doctrines of grace, be found at last but the inventions of a human mind, a mind strong indeed, but strong only in enthusiasm, and inventive only of superstitious notions, can he be right, who has worn out life in laborious exertions to inculcate those doctrines and enforce the superstitious practice to which they lead, as the only religion of the Bible? Suppose the contrary; can he be right, who has rejected those doctrines and the practice resulting from them, and consigned both the one and the other to contempt among the lumber and rubbish of antiquated superstition? To make it right, we must either suppose that by a happy inconsistency of character, a man's heart is better than his head, or else suppose it right for a man to live in constant violation of his conscience, and thus sanctify treason, and baptise hypocrisy virtue. It is easy to admit that a person may be ignorant of many truths, that he may hold many errors, and yet be sound in the fundamental principles of religion. And it is no concern of ours to determine how far a person may be in the wrong and yet be accepted. That is the prerogative of the Judge alone. But how one can be accepted, who, with the Bible in his hands, is so indifferent to its contents, as to take up his religious belief with the recklessness which these maxims tend to encourage, or indeed without the most awful and anxious solicitude, is hard to be conceived. Surely the spirit of the gospel has no affinity with a stoicism like this.

Attracted by the spirit of the gospel, the mind is prepared to receive and appreciate the whole of Revelation. One prolific source of error and dissension undoubtedly is the use of a mutilated Bible. Men have their favorite subjects of thought, as well

as favorite objects of pursuit. If the Bible were considered merely as a work of taste, different men might very safely and innocently select their favorite topicks. While one, for its matchless simplicity and ease, preferred the narrative, another might be captivated with the poetry, and a third with those bursts of celestial eloquence, which disdain competition. But this propensity is often carried even to the doctrines and precepts of the gospel. One selects as a favorite topick the mercy of God. And surely this is a perfection which cannot be extoled too highly, admired too profoundly, or adored too fervently, for it is "love which passeth knowledge." But the fault is, it is considered so exclusively, as though it did not spring from the same root, and had no connexion with that justice, by which an awful grandeur is superadded to its native beauty, that it degenerates into the mere weakness of the doting parent, who, in the excess of fondness, cannot bear to inflict punishment on the froward child, and therefore ceases to be either respected or beloved. Another dwells upon the justice of God so much to the exclusion of its kindred virtue mercy, that his religion assumes the aspect of a chilling gloom. The character of the Holy One becomes distorted, and he who, is revealed as the "Lord merciful and gracious," appears more like the "Manichean god adored through fear, strong only to destroy." Another takes the doctrines collectively, dwells upon them so exclusively and in a manner so abstract and speculative, that if taught by him alone, we might conclude that the Bible was given for the sole purpose of teaching us what we are to believe, not what we are to do. Another dwells upon some practical parts of scripture so constantly and in such a manner, that the chief glory of the Bible, the plan of grace which it reveals, becomes obscured, its sanctions forgotten, its precepts disregarded, and it comes with no more force or authority to the heart than the writings of the mere human moralist. And "Epictetus, Plato, Tully," may as well preach as the apostles of our Lord. "Vice parries wide the inoffensive volley with a sword of straw, and stands an impudent



and fearless mark." The gospel brings all these things into one system of most exact proportion and the most perfect beauty. Shows the precepts founded on the doctrines, or, in other words, all the duties of religion as resulting from the character of God, the character of men, and the relations which men sustain to their Maker and to each other. It is in this beautiful and harmonious union, that the spirit of the gospel leads us to contemplate, admire and love the whole Bible. To such a man there is no part of scripture but what is profitable, none but what is precious. The doctrines are precious. They discover to him the character of God and his own, show the ground of his obligations and the foundation of his hope. The commands are precious, for they make plain the path of duty; in keeping them he finds a great reward, and the only evidence of his union with Christ. The promises are precious. They exhibit the parental love of his Heavenly Father, encourage him to contend against sin, and support him under all the trials of life. The denunciations are precious. They exhibit the same Divine kindness, and their effect is to render him vigilant and guard him from sloth in his Master's service.

With the spirit of the gospel, you have a steady conductor and the safest guide, amidst all the fluctuations and vicissitudes of human opinion. Pope has said,

"Manners with fortune, humours change with climes,  
Tenets with books, and principles with times."

It is only with the last of these assertions that we have any concern. And this, happily for our world, is not a universal truth. But it appears true alas in too many instances. There are men, who seem at least to have no settled principles of religion, or certainly discover no serious and reverential attachment to the Bible. The Bible and their hearts appear like the north poles of two magnets to have no attraction, but to be repulsive to each other. Of course, if veering where no principles are established, may be called change, they are liable to perpetual changes without any adequate cause. Fashion seems their

chart, and self-complacency and pride the only gales, which swell their canvass. In an age of bigotry, therefore, they may be bigots ; in an age of licentiousness, licentious. When infidelity is in fashion, they may be deists, cast their sneers upon the Bible and trifle with that thunderbolt of Heaven. At a different period, the absurdities and abominations of infidelity being exposed and the deist covered with shame, they must have a religion too founded on the Bible. But mark ye, their disposition of heart continuing the same, the Bible becomes in their hands a mere Proteus, capable of assuming every form. And in the multitude of shapes, into which the scriptures have been tortured, men of every disposition and every temperament may find a religion to their taste. The gay and the morose, the sober and the licentious, the fanciful and the plodding, the warm and the phlegmatic, all may find something to soothe their consciences, and screen them from the odium of infidelity, and at the same time to spare their darling passion. But to one who is guided by the spirit of the gospel, though his views of many things may change as the natural effect of growing experience, the Bible always remains the same, ever appears in the same light of beautiful and awful sanctity. His ruling passion is to "know the joyful sound." To its decisions, his reason, his conscience, and his inclination sweetly bow. Thus he finds it in every situation, "a light to his feet and a lamp to his path," and his way becomes like the morning light, "shining more and more unto the perfect day."

In the present state of human affairs, it is scarcely probable that you will be able to proceed far in your inquiries, without finding yourselves more or less involved in controversy. The spirit so necessary to guide your private studies, is of equal importance here. But here, young gentlemen, let me forewarn you of a difficulty of no contemptible magnitude. To nothing is the trite saying, "it is easier to teach than to do," more applicable than to this subject. To point out the spirit which ought to be carried into all controversies, and especially, those which respect

religion, is an easy matter. But to act *in that spirit* in all supposable circumstances, is emphatically *another thing*. To be under necessity of seeing and exposing the faults of others, and be able at the same time to keep your own heart, and be humble under a sense of your own infirmities, to maintain candour in the midst of provocation, to see your statements distorted, mutilated and misrepresented, and give no audience to the importunities of indignation, to let torrents of declamation, ridicule and invective pass and spend their whole force upon your reputation, the reputation of your friends, or on what you esteem the sacred truths of the gospel, and feel no disposition to retaliate, to hear the cry of persecution, against your most candid, benevolent and scriptural endeavors to prevent the destructive influence of error, and answer only with blessings and prayers, to see your fellow creatures, blinded with falsehood and rejoicing in delusion, going down to the chambers of death, to be faithful in warning them, and feel no unholy passion kindled against those who are directing and urging them forward in the road to perdition, to cherish the zeal of Peter in your Master's cause, and suppress the zeal of Peter at what moment it would prompt the sword or suggest the use of any weapons but those of truth and soberness, to persevere in pleading a cause despised and hated by the world, and maintain your neckness in the face of envy chewing wormwood, and spurious charity fiercely frowning, *hic labor, hoc opus est*. This is an undertaking in which it requires no weak or momentary effort to succeed. He who has acquired such a control over his own spirit, has attained the fullest growth and the highest strength of human character, and achieved more than the conquest of a world. Let not the difficulty of the undertaking however discourage you. The enterprise is worthy the disciple of Christ, and to him, who believes, all things are possible. But however difficult to maintain in *its extent*, the spirit of the gospel under all the trials of controversy, there are some departures from this spirit, so very plain and easy to be avoided. that he who is guilty

here is worthy of no excuse, deserves no apology. Of this description are all rudeness and insult, and all unfairness toward an opponent. He, who enters the arena of controversy, does not indeed pledge himself not to be plain hearted, nor to treat his opponent as he would a weak or erring christian *brother*. The former were always improper, the latter in some cases impossible. But he ought to understand that he is pledged to treat him with politeness as a man, and fairness as a disputant. How well it comports with the former, to assail him with ridicule and reproach, by sly insinuation or open slander, to attempt to blacken his character, to cast on him the odium of all the follies, extravagancies and crimes of those, who may have held the same belief, *all* may judge. And how does it comport with the latter, to evade or misrepresent the statements or arguments of an opponent? By this means you may charge him with a belief, which he never held; but is this ingenuous? You may refute an argument he never used, and say you have refuted him. Is this conducting like your Master? Will he approve of this?

Of the same character is the cry of persecution, whenever raised for the purpose of moving sympathy, or exciting prejudice. A man, under the influence of the purest spirit, may feel bound to oppose another and with the greatest warmth. But he would shudder at the thought of persecuting him. And being destitute of a spirit of persecution himself, he is not ready to fancy a persecutor at every turn, nor to think himself persecuted by every one that opposes him. Nothing is to be considered persecution but what implies violence, or a disposition to use it. Paul did not persecute Peter though he withstood him to the face. Peter did not persecute the Jews, though he charged them with the foulest crimes and the basest unbelief.

If a person supposed to understand the nature of argument, give a false representation of my views of the gospel, and then publish it as mine, if he deduce conclusions from my premises, and without my concurrence, declare them mine, if, by misrepresentation and coloring of my arguments, he create an oppo-



ment of his own fancy and dress him to his liking, and then having stoutly cleft the fools cap on his head, boast that he has demolished my helmet, then, indeed, I can hardly acquit him of the guilt of cherishing that acrimonious spirit, which implies persecution. But if he correctly state my belief and fairly meet my arguments, if he express or insinuate no slander, if he bring no railing accusation, then let him come against me like a giant armed and spare nothing of his strength. Let him, by his deductions, show that the doctrines, which I vindicate, involve the principles of deism, atheism, or idolatry. Let him show his love to his fellow men, by warning them faithfully of the dangerous tendency of my principles, as taking away all motives to a virtuous life. Let him be earnest here. Let him cry and not spare. Let him wind the trumpet with his strongest breath, and sound an alarm, that shall swell the thunder of the mountain storm, awake the echoes of the deepest glen, and roll on the reflux wave to the source of every stream. Instead of considering him my persecutor, I will honor him as one who has done his duty. His views I may consider as erroneous as he does mine, and may lament that he wears the mantle of prejudice, wrapped so closely around him. But with his views, what could I expect, what could I ask for more? Thus he, who walks in the spirit of the gospel, is candid, open, liberal, sincere. He asks nothing unreasonable, and all that he asks he as freely grants. His opponent is sure at least of handsome treatment. He may consider him weak, ignorant or even bigoted, but he will respect the stern integrity of his heart; and pitying his weakness, will wait, with prayer and good will, until the darkness pass away, and the clear light dawn upon his mind. Let this spirit become universal, and then adieu, a long and happy adieu to that cruel animosity which has disgraced the christian name, and welcome that candid and friendly discussion by which truth is elicited and hearts united.

There is a spirit, which contrasts with this, presenting a character so incongruous and deformed that no pleasure of mine,



I assure you, young gentlemen, but a consciousness of the duty of warning you against it, induces me to sketch the portrait.—With the open face of candour, and with a smile gentle and benignant as the softest tints of this summer evening, I take you by the hand. Come, brother, we have a common interest, let us be one. Charity is the first of virtues ; let us lay aside our differences, or retain them as of no consequence and walk and build together. If you return my embrace and say, brother, retain your belief, for it is of little consequence what a man believes : propagate your principles, true, I do not hold with you, but have no controversy with you, and shall use no exertions to prevent or counteract the influence of your principles, then indeed we are friends. But if you reply charity is indeed the chief of virtues, and to dwell in brotherly love the most desirable thing on earth. But your views of revealed truth are so essentially different from mine, that I must withdraw my hand. And though I do it with the most painful reluctance, must use my influence to counteract the tendency of your principles, as opposed to the kingdom of Heaven, subversive of the christian's expectation and the sinner's hope, then my *poor, dear, weak* brother, I will show you the counterpart of my charity. I will bristle you the lion's mane, I will plant you the foot of stern defiance, I will lower on you with the eye of indignant scorn, and with a voice hollow and dismal as the echoes of the charnel house, I will growl *superstition, enthusiasm, bigotry, intolerance, and persecution* until your very soul is charmed with the musick, and your cold and senseless heart melted into sweet sympathy with my own.—Behold the picture ! let that suffice ; may an original never be found.

In short, in whatever pertains to the religion of Christ, the spirit of the gospel is all-important. With this, a person, though ignorant, is in the fairest way of becoming wise, for “the integrity of the upright shall guide him.” With this, he will strive to serve his Maker, with what he does possess, and thus to preserve a “conscience void of offence.” With this he is sure of

ultimate victory over sin and error, and of final rest in the bosom of everlasting love, for this is that "charity," which "never faileth." *Without this*, your misguided inquiries will be but so many ignorant attempts to evade the truth, and put an extinguisher on the candle of the Lord. *Without this*, the knowledge which you may obtain will serve but to feed your pride and generate that haughtiness of spirit, which invariably forebodes a fall. *Without this*, zeal becomes fanaticism, devotion hypocrisy, and the door of hope is closed and bolted forever by that solemn declaration, "if any man have not the spirit of Christ he is none of his."

Though I have detained you long, I know not how to close without adverting for a moment to the great advantages of your situation. Twenty years ago,—“Remembrance of joys, which are past, pleasant and mournful to the soul!” Twenty years ago, I and my companions trode the same pleasant paths and drank from the same delicious springs of science. But, in the then infant state of the institution, how small the advantages, compared with those which you enjoy, for prosecuting this or any branch of interesting inquiry. So great are the advances in improvement, by new requisitions in the preparatory department, by the increase of libraries, the establishment of new societies, the filling of professorships, and the institution of lectures, that my simple, but beloved home seems like a cottage overtopped and obscured by the splendid edifices, which have been reared around it. Nought looks the same, but yonder lake and yonder mountains, and the other natural scenery, with which the institution is surrounded. In thy prosperity, O Alma Mater, I rejoice; and you, young gentlemen, I congratulate on a change so much to your advantage. Only remember that great advantages can never be received but a great weight of obligation must be taken with them. Let your ardour then in pursuing the object of your association, correspond with your advantages. Let it be your first concern to secure as the panoply of your souls the spirit of the gospel. Take fast hold of

this "instruction, let her not *go*, *keep* her, for she is your life." Let your constant and most fervent prayer be that the Spirit, from on high, may descend upon you as the dew of Heaven, and as showers on the hill of Zion, until imbuing and penetrating your whole soul with its influence, it shall become not only incorporated among the first principles of your moral nature, but also the ruling passion, and leading principle of it. Then as the truths of the gospel unfold to your understanding, they shall not only exhibit new beauties, discover new connexions and relations in the moral world, all manifesting the wisdom and goodness of the Holy One, but shall produce their full effect upon your moral character, mature you for the society above, and render your transition natural and easy to joys unspeakable and full of glory.